

## COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVENESS: ACTIVE LISTENING AND SENDING FEELING MESSAGES

(By Jack N. Wismer)

*"I know you believe that you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."*

When a person communicates a message to another person, the message usually contains two elements: content and feeling. Both elements are important because both give the message meaning. However, we often do not understand other people's messages or are misunderstood by others because we forget that meanings are in people, not in words.

### **The Risk of Communicating Non-acceptance:**

The communication of mutual acceptance is vital to developing and maintaining work and personal relationships. However, various ways of responding to situations run the risk of communicating non-acceptance. To understand a person's point of view effectively, it is necessary not to communicate non-acceptance. According to Gordon (1970, pp. 41-44), author of several books on active listening, most people, in a listening situation, commonly respond in one or more of the following twelve ways:<sup>1</sup>

1. *Ordering, Directing*: "You have to..."
2. *Warning, Threatening*: "You'd better not..."
3. *Preaching, Moralizing*: "You ought to..."
4. *Advising, Giving Solutions*: "Why don't you..."
5. *Lecturing, Informing*: "Here are the facts..."
6. *Evaluating, Blaming*: "You're wrong..."
7. *Praising, Agreeing*: "You're right..."
8. *Name-calling Shaming*: "You're stupid..."
9. *Interpreting, Analyzing*: "What you need..."
10. *Sympathizing, Supporting*: "You'll be OK..."
11. *Questioning, Probing*: "Why did you..."
12. *Withdrawing, Avoiding*: "Let's forget it..."
- 13.

These modes of response may communicate to the sender that it is not acceptable to feel the way he or she

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<sup>1</sup>Abstracted from Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training*, Peter H. Wyden, New York, 1970. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass, Inc. a subsidiary of John Wiley and Sons, Inc. From: *Pfeiffer/the 1972 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, Pages 173-17

feels. If the sender perceives one of these messages as indicating non-acceptance, there is a risk will become defensive about new ideas, will be resistive to changing behavior, will tend to justify certain feelings, or will turn silent because the listener is perceived as only passively interested in the sender.

### ***ACTIVE LISTENING***

A more effective way of responding to a listening situation is called "active listening." Gordon (1970) defines active listening as a communication skill to help people solve their own problems. In active listening, the listener is involved with the sender's need to communicate. To be effective, the listener must take an "active" responsibility to understand the content and feeling of what is being said. The listener can respond with a statement, in his own words, of what he feels the sender's message means. For example:

Sender: "The deadline for this report is not realistic!"

Listener: "You feel you're pressured to get the report done."

If the listener is to understand the sender's meaning, he will need to "put himself in the other person's place." Feeding back perceptions of intended meaning allows the listener to check the accuracy of his listening and understanding.

#### **Benefits of Active Listening:**

An open communication climate for understanding is created through active listening. The listener can learn to see what a person means and how the person feels about situations and problems. Active listening is a skill that can communicate acceptance and increase interpersonal trust among people. It can also facilitate problem solving. Therefore, the appropriate use of active listening increases the communication effectiveness of people.

#### **Pitfalls in Active Listening:**

Active listening is not intended to manipulate people to behave or think the way others think they should. The listener also should not "parrot" someone's message by repeating the exact words used. Empathy is a necessary ingredient--the listener should communicate warmth toward and feeling about the sender's message by putting himself in the sender's place. Timing is another pitfall; active listening is not appropriate when there is no time to deal with the situation or when someone is asking only for factual information. Also, it is important that the listener be sensitive to nonverbal messages about the right time to stop giving feedback. Avoiding these common pitfalls will make "active listening" a more effective communication skill.

#### **Principle of Problem Ownership:**

Since active listening is most appropriate when a person expresses feelings about a problem, it is necessary to ask who owns the problem. The principle of problem ownership can be demonstrated in the following situations.

1. Person A's needs are not being satisfied by his or her own behavior, and A's behavior does not directly interfere with Person B's satisfaction of his or her own needs. Therefore, A owns the problem.
2. Person A's needs are being satisfied, but his or her behavior interferes in some way with Person B's satisfaction of his or her own needs and thus creates a problem for B. B then owns the problem

Person A is satisfying his or her own needs, and his or her behavior does not directly interfere with Person B's needs. In this case, there is no problem.

Active listening is very useful, but it is not appropriate to use if another person's behavior is creating the problem.

## **COMMUNICATING ONE'S NEEDS**

### **Ineffective Approaches:**

It is necessary for the person who owns the problem to know how to confront it and communicate his or her needs so that other people will listen. However, people frequently confront problems in a way that tends to stimulate defensiveness and resistance. The two most common approaches:

1. *Evaluating*--which communicates judgment, blame, ridicule, or shame ("Don't you know how to use that machine?" "You're late again!"). This method has several risks: (a) it makes people defensive and resistant to further communication; (b) it implies power over the other person; and (c) it threatens and reduces the other person's self-esteem.
2. Sending solutions--which communicates what the other person should do rather than what the speaker is feeling ("If you don't come in on time, I'll have to report you"; "Why don't you do it this way?"). Sending solutions carries risks: (a) people become resistive if they are told what to do, even if they agree with the solution; (b) this approach indicates that the sender's needs are more important than the receiver's; (c) it communicates a lack of trust in other people's capacities to solve their own problems; and (d) it reduces the responsibility to define the problem clearly and explore feasible alternatives to a problem.

### **A More Effective Approach:**

Problems can be confronted and one's needs can be made known without making other people feel defensive. An effective communication message involves three components: (1) owning feelings, (2) sending feelings, and (3) describing behavior.

Ownership of feelings focuses on "who owns the problem." The sender of a message needs to accept responsibility for his or her own feelings. Messages that own the sender's feelings usually begin with or contain "I."

Sometimes, communicating feelings is viewed as a weakness, but the value of sending feelings is communicating honesty and openness by focusing on the problem and not evaluating the person.

Describing behavior concentrates on what one person sees and hears and feels about another person's behavior as it affects the observer's feelings and behavior. The focus is on specific situations that relate to specific times and places.

It is useful to distinguish between descriptions and evaluations of behavior. The italicized parts of the next statements illustrate *evaluations* of behavior:

"I can't finish this report *if you are so inconsiderate as to interrupt me.*"

"*You're a loudmouth.*" The italicized parts of the following statements are *descriptions* of behavior:

"I can't finish this report *if you constantly interrupt me.*"

"I feel that *you talked considerably during the meetings.*"

A design for sending feeling messages can be portrayed as follows.

Ownership + Feeling Word + Description of Behavior = Feeling Message

Example:

*I* (ownership) am *concerned* (feeling word) about *finishing this report on time*" (description of behavior)

The effectiveness of feeling messages can be attributed to several factors:

- "I" messages are more effective because they place responsibility with the sender of the message.
- "I" messages reduce the other person's defensiveness and resistance to further communication.
- Behavioral descriptions provide feedback about the other person's behavior but do not evaluate it.
- Although "I" messages require some courage, they honestly express the speaker's feelings.
- Feeling messages promote open communication in work and personal relationships.

## SUMMARY

Sending feeling messages and listening actively are skills that can be applied to work, family, and personal relationships.

No one is wrong. At most someone is uninformed. If I think a man is wrong, either I am unaware of something, or he is. So unless I want to play a superiority game I had best find out what he is looking at.

"You're wrong" means "I don't understand you" — I'm not sending what you're seeing. But there is nothing wrong with you, you are simply not me and that's not wrong. (Prather, 1970, unpagged)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From *Notes to Myself* by Hugh Prather. Copyright © 1970 by Real People Press. Used with permission.

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